

BOOK REVIEWS

JOSEPH MICALLEF, *When Malta Stood Alone*, Interprint, Malta, 1981, pp. 190 + illus.

In the preface to this book, the author modestly states "that there is a lot of research still to be done before the full story of life in Malta during the World War II is finally written. *When Malta Stood Alone* is only another contribution towards the compilation of the history of the Maltese during the fateful years 1940-3." In substance, what Fr. Micallef says is true but I beg to differ on the point regarding this book being "only another contribution". In my opinion, it is more than that for it really highlights, explores into and graphically describes what the people of Malta went through during those years.

Fr. Micallef tries to avoid repeating what has been published in book form on the subject and concentrates on presenting the reader with a social study of the Maltese people during the war years. To achieve this end, he had recourse to direct sources which consisted mainly of eye-witnesses' accounts, official reports and day-to-day records of the war which had been rescued from probable oblivion by Mr Michael El-lul, Head of the Antiquities Section of the Public Works Department when Fr. Micallef was researching. I can hardly imagine a better source for such a work.

The result is a well-written social account giving innumerable details and experiences without resorting to any type of fiction. To illustrate his

points, Fr. Micallef at times quotes heavily from the source material mentioned and it is a great pity that some form of chapter and verse references could not be given. Indeed, it is very difficult to find faults in the book except perhaps a few clumsy expressions and the need of better proof-reading at times. However, an index in a book of this kind is a must and its inclusion would have considerably enhanced its status.

Even so, I feel that, through this work, Fr. Micallef has enhanced his well-deserved reputation of being of one of Malta's foremost social historians whose work should be read by all students of Maltese history.

Joseph F. Grima

WINSTON L. ZAMMIT, *Tas-Sliema fl-Imghoddi*, Lux Press, Malta, 1981, pp. 116 incl. illus.

This is a particularly welcome historical publication since, to date, almost nothing has been published about the origins and growth of what is now one of Malta's most densely populated areas. It is quite evident that Mr. Zammit has based his work on proper historical research going as far back as the seventeenth century and that he has tried very hard — with commensurate success — to present us with a history of the origins and growth of Sliema without including legends and doses of parochialism. The appendices and bibliography at the end of the book and the references at the end of each chapter are also to be appreciated.

I would, however, fault this work on two main sins of omission. Firstly, it does not contain an index and,

secondly, the period 1945 to date is skimmed over in just three pages of print. One might argue that the author's intention was to present a picture of Sliema's past history and that the post-war period is recent or contemporary. However, it is my personal opinion that, since the work was written in 1979 and published in 1981, the first two post-war decades should have been given a much treatment and thus a great contribution would have been made to the study of how Sliema became what it is today, essentially a tourist resort. Such an extension and the inclusion of an index would have considerably enhanced the value of the book, which is no mean contribution even as it is.

Personally, I also expected more illustrative material in a work of this kind and I would have preferred to read through Appendix B in Maltese instead of an English list and sources headed by an introduction in Maltese. However, further credit should be given to the neat printing, good quality paper and the attractive cover which depicts an old picture of the Strand.

On the whole, Mr. Zammit is to be congratulated on his initiative, effort and on the work he has presented. I have no hesitation in recommending the Melitensia lover to acquire a copy of this book.

Joseph F. Grima

CARMEL BONAVIDA, *Bibliography of Maltese Textbooks 1651—1979*, Old University, Msida, Malta, 1979, pp.76.

This work can be said to be very helpful to the student of education development in Malta as well as being a useful bibliography on a part-

icular aspect of Maltese life. The author has opted for the chronological sequence when presenting the work and this facilitates an overall and general view of changes and reforms initiated at various times. Mr. Bonavia also includes a brief history of the use of text-books in Maltese schools.

Definitively a very good contribution towards the study of education in Malta, this work should find a place on the bookshelves of all Melitensia lovers.

Joseph F. Grima

FLECKENSTEIN, JOSEF — Manfred Hellmann (eds.) *The Religious Orders of Knights in Europe*. ["Die geistlichen Ritterorden Europas"] (Vorträge und Forschungen XXVI, Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte) Sigmarigen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1980, 429 pp.

This interesting volume contains nineteen historical studies of which seventeen are papers presented at two conferences held by the "Konstanz Working Group" in October 1977 and March 1978.

Of particular interest to the historian of medieval society, these papers present a comparative study on the early history of the European religious orders of knights, particularly the Templars, Teutonic Knights, Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, Dobrin and St. George, as well as the Hospitallers.

Maltese historians are here provided with further information about the history of the foundation and early vicissitudes of the Knights of St. John.

Rudolf Hiestand writes about 'The beginnings of the Knights of St. John'

while Anthony Luttrell about 'The Hospitallers of Rhodes: Prospects, problems, possibilities'. The Order of the Hospitallers, like the many other chivalric orders, came into being in connection with the crusading movement. Its organisation and membership provide an outstanding representation of medieval social ethics and piety.

C.G.S.

LUTTRELL, ANTHONY, "*The Augustinians at Malta: 1413*", extract *Analecta Augustiniana*, Vol. XXXVIII, Institutum Historicum Ord. S. Augustini, Rome, 1975.

In this article, two interesting documents regarding the presence of the Augustinians in Malta, confirm that the Augustinian Order had a convent in Malta by 1413.

C.G.S.

LAURENCE MIZZI, *Għall-Holma ta' Hajtu*, Klabb Kotba Maltin, Malta, 1980, pp. 102 + illus.

A well-written account about a controversial Maltese during the Second World War, this book tries to delve into the motives which spurred on Carmelo Borg Pisani, hanged for espionage on 28th November 1942. Mr. Mizzi tries to answer many questions: why did Borg Pisani go to Italy? What did he do there? Why did he remain there on the outbreak of hostilities? Why was he the one chosen for espionage work out of all the Maltese in Italy at the time? How was he actually caught? What were his motives, real or apparent? Was he personally ambitious? Did he really believe that what he was doing

could actually benefit Malta?

In his typically honest and straightforward way, Mr. Mizzi tries to give us the answers to these and to other questions. The author's task was not easy for there is little written material to work on and permission to peruse the records of Borg Pisani's trial was not forthcoming. Yet Mr. Mizzi manages to give us a pleasingly unadulated biography which tries very hard to present as true an account of events as possible although I have a sneaking feeling that the author subconsciously admires Borg Pisani more than he actually admits.

The author is the first to acknowledge that this is by no means the final word on the Borg Pisani episode and notes that more information may possibly be gleaned from Italian military and naval sources and most certainly from the court records of his trial when these are finally allowed to be scrutinized by the public.

Yet, in spite of this and the seemingly perennially missing indexes in most works published in Malta, Mr. Mizzi does give a worthwhile contribution to our island's history which I would not hesitate to recommend.

Joseph F. Grima

ALEXANDER BONNICI, *L-Isla fi Grajjiet il-Bażilka-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina, Vol. I; Twelid ta' Belt u ta' Parroċċa*, Printwell, Malta, 1981, pp. 179, illus.

1981 is the fourth centenary of the raising of Senglea to parish status and the publication of this book was meant to commemorate this event. Personally, I can think of no better way to perpetuate such events and more particularly when such works

are entrusted to trained historians. Unfortunately, there is no dearth of articles, pamphlets and even books about local history which are written by amateurs in the truest and fullest sense of the word and which only serve to instil into the uninitiated an acceptance of the mediocre and, unfortunately, the propagation of mere parochialism. Happily, this is not the case with the work under review.

Its author, the Franciscan Conventual Father Alexander Bonnici, certainly needs no introduction to Melitensia readers and collectors. His prolific works — be they religious, historical or biographical — all bear witness to his painstaking research for the truth without looking at events through tinted glasses. This volume, about the first century of the existence of Senglea (or *l-Isla*), is a continuation of Fr. Bonnici's delving into the past to present the reader with a true account and an exact picture of what really happened and what acutlly existed, without resorting to the recounting of legends or figments of the imagination.

Fr. Bonnici notes that at first he did not know where to begin from. He started, naturally enough, by reading all the published material he could find about Senglea. He then realized that a number of spoken accounts about Senglea were not to be found in published works. As every serious historian knows, popular accounts are notorious for their untruths, inconsistencies and imaginative presentations; they have to be verified and this was exactly what was done in this case. Fr. Bonnici has not relied on hearsay or even on published material but has had recourse to the different archives where the

real source material is to be found. He has shown that even the manuscript entitled *Memorie Ecclesiastiche* in the Senglea Archives and written in 1786 — and on which quite a number of writings about Senglea are based — contains a number of inaccuracies and errors which is quite understandable particularly when the writer, presumably the Archpriest of Senglea Fr. Salv. Bonnici, was recounting events which had happened about 200 years before. However, Fr. Bonnici has been critical in his approach and the result is a very good history of Senglea's first 100 years based on critical, painstaking, and sometimes frustrating, research extending over a long period of time.

The book is divided into six main parts which amply cover Senglea's history from the coming of the Knights to Malta up to 1634. We are told, for example, baout the two hills of Senglea, the connection of Grand Masters d'Omedes and La Sengle with Senglea, the Church of Our Lady of Victories, the pastoral work of the first three parish priests, i.e. Fr. Anton di Nicolaci, Fr. Vincent Caruana and Fr. Cosimo Ta'avera, a description of the first parish church as it existed during the times of these first three parish priests and an insight into the social history of the inhabitants. In chapter after chapter, historical facts follow each other with regularity and, as much as possible, in chronological sequence. The lay-out of each chapter is, in fact, as orderly as one may expect. Profusely footnoted, the book leaves the reader in no doubt as to the authenticity of the facts being recounted. The chapters are also

amply illustrated with concise, relevant and explanatory captions. After the six chapters, there follow four appendices of relevant documents, whilst appendix E covers a list of important dates in the history of Senglea covering the period 1539-1634. Pages 169-170 give us a list of the manuscripts consulted in eight different archives.

Lastly, one must thank Fr. Bonnici for providing this book with an analytical index. Unfortunately, most local publications lack such an index and it is indeed a relief that such work avoids this shortcoming.

Indeed, I find it difficult to fault this work on any count. It is neatly printed with an attractive cover design by Trevor Zahra. In many ways, this book has reminded me of Fr. Joseph Micallef's *Hal Luqa: Niesha u Grajjietha* (reviewed in *Melita Historica*, Vol. 6, p. 458-9), not least because of its sound basic research and critical approach. I would indeed recommend budding writers of local history to follow in Bonnici's and Micallef's footsteps when attempting the writing of the history of a particular town or village.

I certainly have no hesitation in recommending this book and hope that the second volume will see the light of day very shortly.

Joseph F. Grima

JOSEPH ATTARD, *The Battle of Malta*, William Kimber, London, 1980, pp. 252 + illus., £M9. 95.

Another addition to the growing number of books about Malta during the Second World War, this book may in some ways be turned as an eye-witness report. The author, not

yet fifteen years of age at the outbreak of war, delves deeply into his personal reminiscences and supplements them by an appreciable amount of research to try and present the reader with a vivid picture of our island in one of its most tragic and equally glorious times. The sixteen chapters of the book are replete with vivid and very lucid portraits of the memorable events now part and parcel of Maltese history, episodes which were sad, tragic sometimes joyous, and most certainly glorious.

Mr. Attard is a well-known writer but, essentially, he is not a historian. This book shows him at his best as a writer but also betrays his lack of the historian's approach to the writing of history. His understandably very rapid — but equally not so understandably the rather flowery — survey of Malta's pre-1940 history is inaccurate at times as when he asserts that "*whenever there was cause, Maltese Bishops and priests repeatedly led the people in peaceful protests and more than once in armed insurrection, and when circumstances warranted it Grand Masters of the Order were unseated.*" I disagree. It is true that many peaceful protests existed but there is record of only ONE armed insurrection, the Rising of the Priests of 1775, and, as far as is known only one Grand Master was deposed. I am referring of course, to La Cassière, and even this episode was only an internal matter of the Order. The image of the Maltese people as liberty-loving folk has to be built up on known solid facts and not on generic statements of the kind quoted. Also, there is no real proof that the mass of the

Maltese appealed to "Napoleon to destroy the aristocratic Republic of the Sovereign Order", as stated by Mr. Attard. And how does the author know that the Maltese called in the Normans to expel the Arabs?

After noting such inaccuracies, I was afraid that I was in for more in the actual subject-matter of the book. Happily this fear did not materialize and what emerged in general is a well-balanced account which I would fault only on two main items. Being a writer, it seems that Mr. Attard could not desist from inserting a number of pen-portraits of fictitious persons. Admittedly, they represent people who actually existed, but they remain fictitious all the same. Secondly, I believe that more details should have been forthcoming on the question of food distribution and the lack of foodstuffs on the island.

On the whole, the rest of the many details are accurate enough though it must be pointed out that the episode concerning the Gozitan wheat supplies for Malta happened in July 1942 and not in October 1942 and that there were no actual anti-aircraft guns at St Elmo before 1941, as implied in the book.

On the whole, a book worth reading.

Joseph F. Grima

QUENTIN HUGHES, *Britain in the Mediterranean and the Defence of Her Naval Stations*, Penpaed Books, London, 1981, 235 pp. + ill. and maps.

This is the story, ably told by Prof. Quentin Hughes, of Britain's naval presence in the Mediterranean and of

the bases which harboured her fleets between the seventeenth century and the year 1979, when the White Ensign was lowered for the last time on the heights of Fort St Angelo in Malta's Grand Harbour. It is the dramatic story of Britain's strength at sea in the Mediterranean, of the vicissitudes, the fortunes and upheavals of a proud and powerful navy, of brave men, of ambitious empire-builders, of a type of colonialism now outdated but once accepted as a fact of life, and as necessary for the livelihood of the people who lived in and around the huge establishments which the British fleet required for the upkeep, provisioning, repair and maintenance of its ships.

Quentin Hughes is not only an established historian in his own right, but also one of the foremost living experts on military architecture. In this book he relates at length and in detail the story of battles lost and won both on land and at sea, of the development of military thinking through almost three centuries, of the weapons employed and of the men behind them, and above all of land fortifications as a means of defence against attacking warships.

Hughes devotes nine chapters of the book's eighteen almost exclusively to Malta. He knows and loves Malta well: he served here for two and a half years during the last war, and in 1968 was appointed to the Chair of Architecture at the (then Royal) University of Malta. His books about Malta and her buildings are well

known: *The Building of Malta 1530-1795* has become the standard book on the architecture of the Knights of Malta, and *Fortress: Architecture and Military History in Malta* relates in word and pictures the almost unique character of an architectural tradition which despite strong outside influences remains peculiarly Maltese.

The book opens in the sixteenth century, when the mighty Ottoman Empire, and the equally powerful but more prosperous Christian states, mostly Spain, the Venice Republic and the Order of St. John were the main contestants for supremacy in the Mediterranean. Trading had always been the main activity in the Mediterranean, but this soon degenerated into piracy, organized corsairing and coastal raiding. After the favourable outcome of the Siege of Malta in 1565 and the defeat of the Turkish fleet by the combined Christian navies at Lepanto in 1571, Turkish sea-power declined, but its threat to Christianity never really ceased completely.

During this same period Britain had a flourishing trade in the Middle Sea, and the English Levant Company was firmly established in Constantinople by 1581, drawn by the promise of big profits in the spice commerce. The political sagacity of Elizabeth I made her take advantage of the situation caused by piracy, which served as an excuse to push Britain's entry as a naval power in the Mediterranean.

By the middle of the seventeenth cen-

tury the British established a clear-cut Mediterranean policy backed by a powerful and professionally-run fleet with the avowed aim of protecting their trading interests and merchant shipping. In 1651, the British Parliament voted funds for the permanent stationing of a naval squadron. The need for a safe harbour and a well-equipped station became essential. Oliver Cromwell set his eyes on Gibraltar, but the British naval commander was hesitant, and the attempt to capture it was put off. By shrewd political manoeuvring, however, Britain succeeded in possessing herself of Tangier, an all-weather harbour, in 1662, but which she abandoned in 1683 because it proved to be too big a strain on her resources. The need for bases became more pressing as the British Mediterranean fleet grew larger and stronger, and Gibraltar was captured from Spain in 1704, followed by the occupation of Minorca, the second largest island in the Balearics, with its valuable Port Mahon, in 1708. In 1756 it was the scene of an undecided naval action between the British and the French, and Spain recovered Minorca in 1782, losing it again to the British in 1802. The quest for more naval bases continued further east, and in 1794 the British took Corsica from the French. In 1796, in what was then described as an eternal disgrace to the Pitt Government, they evacuated Corsica. By the close of the eighteenth century, Britain had thus pulled out of the Mediterranean possessions except for two feeble footholds at Gibraltar and Elba. The position of Britain at this time

was certainly not one of strength, and her fleet became stretched to the utmost. The invasion of England by Napoleon became an overriding risk, and the British Government decided to pin the invasion forces in their home ports of Brest and Cadiz. But when news reached the Admiralty in London that the French were massing a large invasion fleet at Toulon, it was realized that the French would either sail west to England, or east to Egypt, and eventually to British India. Nelson, on board the Vanguard and commanding a powerful squadron, was sent by Earl St. Vincent to keep a close watch off Toulon. The British fleet was beset by a series of unfortunate incidents, and Napoleon succeeded in eluding its surveillance. Napoleon landed in Malta on June 11, 1798 and captured the Island from the Knights. On June 19, he left Malta, leaving a small garrison, and sailed with his fleet towards Egypt, with the British under Nelson in hot pursuit. Nelson caught up with Napoleon in Aboukir Bay and destroyed his proud fleet, but Napoleon succeeded to make his way through the coastal strip which is now Israel and reach France. The British navy thus regained dominance of the Mediterranean, a supremacy which Britain retained unchallenged till 1941. Meanwhile in our Island, the Maltese insurgents and the whole population, aided by the British, drove out the French in 1800, and called in Britain as their Protector. The British did not take long in realizing the supreme importance of Malta as their foremost naval base in

the Mediterranean. For almost two centuries they strengthened the land defences, built new forts, established a dockyard second to none, and dotted the shore with the best coastal artillery of that time.

With Malta safe under the shadow of the White Ensign, the quest for further stations continued. This time the British cast their eyes further east towards the Ionian islands, and what they were unable to capture by force they obtained at the Conference Table. By the treaty of Paris of 1815, the seven Ionian Islands came under British protection and remained so for the next fifty years. Britain eventually established bases in Alexandria, Suez and Haifa: the Mediterranean became a British lake. But two world wars, an economy completely changed by financial stresses, new concepts in warfare, technological progress, the end of colonialism and of the Empire, changed all this. Britain which came into the Mediterranean like a lion left quietly as a gentle lamb: the last link was with Malta which was only severed in March of 1979 when the last of the British men-of-war which had filled our harbours for almost two centuries left for Home.

It is a story well and truly told, factual and without any emotional recourse to patriotism, or nostalgia for the old days. The illustrations are well-chosen and most of them rare, whilst the large number of maps and sketches gives the book added interest and value. Unfortunately the book has too many misprints, the

print is too small and close and annoyingly tiring to the eyes. But it is definitely a book which students of Mediterranean affairs and especially

of Maltese history cannot afford to do without.

Michael Ellul